

## RELEASING INFORMATION

(September 1991)

0662

It is particularly important at the onset of the emergency and during critical stages to advise the local public of the location, nature, and potential of the situation. Information personnel cannot count on the media and public to drop by or phone when needed or even to maintain a continuing interest through periods of little change.

The responsibility to relate significant details in a timely manner rests with center personnel. Information personnel should report major events or changes as soon as the facts are confirmed. Idle moments when phones are not ringing and visitors are not present provide an ideal opportunity to review the time lapse from media call-ins, to study the current information display, and to contact outlets that have not received a current update. Information officers should strive especially to maintain current contacts with the media outlets which serve the affected area.

One of the most critical elements of center operation is the need for all information personnel to release the same information. Each Information officer must supply identical facts, but give personal service. Although information officers tailor the news for each media and location, the reporter will interpret the facts for the public. The media can acquaint the public with the problems, provide instructions, and help prevent similar incidents if given good information. Information officers should not be disappointed, however, if the coverage is not what they expected or desired.

Local news outlets may place different priorities on incident information than metropolitan or regional media. The community newspaper may feature items which receive only a few seconds of air time on a large metropolitan television station. Information officers should treat all media equally but keep in mind that local news outlets will still be their daily contacts after the major events fade away.

Information personnel must remember that a reporter's job is gathering and reporting the facts. If reporters don't receive the facts as they develop, they will find what they want on their own. All reporters want to find information that no one else has. Some may attempt to "sensationalize" or exaggerate the facts to make it seem as if the information is more impressive than it really is. Others will attempt to develop special angles by focusing on one aspect of an incident and trying to force a story out of it. Information personnel must not be coerced nor led into agreeing to something or making a comment which is not factual. For more information on dealing with reporters, see [Section 0636](#), Interview Tips. Reporters understand news values, but they need to rely on the information personnel for an early estimate of the incident potential so the editors may plan their coverage. An "educated guess" by the Incident Commander does not always have to be right to be appreciated.

## **EMERGENCY BROADCASTING INFORMATION**

(September 1991)

**0662.1**

Section 73.1250 of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Rules and Regulations permits broadcasting of emergency information as follows:

- Emergency situations in which the broadcasting of information is considered as furthering the safety of life and property include, but are not limited to the following:
  - Tornadoes
  - Hurricanes
  - Flood
  - Tidal waves
  - Earthquakes
  - Icy conditions
  - Heavy snows
  - Widespread fire
  - Discharge of toxic gasses
  - Widespread power failures
  - Industrial explosions
  - Civil disorders
  - School closings and changes in school bus schedules resulting from such conditions
- If requested by responsible public officials (e.g., CAL FIRE Incident Commander), a station may, at its discretion and without further FCC authority, transmit emergency point-to-point messages for the purpose of requesting or dispatching aid and assisting in rescue operations.

## **SPECIAL SITUATIONS/ADVERSE NEWS**

(September 1991)

**0662.2**

At times, the department must deal with sensitive news situations such as:

- Fatalities
- Injuries (burns)
- Aircraft accidents
- Vehicle accidents
- Extensive loss of homes
- Inmate walkaways
- Scandals in CAL FIRE
- Evacuations
- Control burn escapes

The department should always send an Assistant Information Officer to the scene immediately to verify the occurrence of a fatality, accident, or other sensitive issue. During these incidents, information gathering and verification is vital because of the possible negative consequences to the department. The department will maintain an open and up-front attitude in dealing with the media.

Department policy and procedures from the [8100 ECC Procedures Handbook](#) indicate the information needed and the methods for gathering and releasing sensitive information. The news media will exert pressure to get names and details quickly. Information personnel will need to rely on knowledge of procedures to communicate effectively during these situations.

The situations will be unique and may only require notification of family before releasing names. The details will be more sensitive.

The Incident Information Officer directs the release of information. Sources include the Incident Commander, investigative officer, and Unit Chief.

Facts and tips for dealing with specific sensitive situations follow:

- Fatality - The coroner's office or the department may release victims' names after the notification of next-of-kin, but details of the accident need clearance from the Incident Commander and investigative officer.
- CAL FIRE Peace Officer Involved Shooting - In the event of a CAL FIRE peace officer involved shooting, the Unit Information Officer shall consult the Law Enforcement Procedures Handbook, Section 9451.5, Report of Firearms Use. Information personnel shall direct all inquiries to the Chief of Law Enforcement or designee.

It may be necessary to establish an information center to handle media inquiries about a shooting incident. If there is an existing information center, the Information Center Manager may want to bring in additional personnel to handle the increased workload.

- Injuries - Unit personnel will notify families before Information Officers release names to the media. All burn victims are transported to approved burn centers per department policy.
- Accidents (Aircraft/Vehicle) - Since releasing the name of the Air Attack facility involved may mislead the media and the public as to who the victims may be, information officers should be cautious when releasing information prior to the names of the accident victims; they should first consider how the information may be interpreted and used.
- Inmates - The jurisdictional agency, i.e., the Department of Corrections or the county sheriff, usually releases information on inmates. In order to interview or photograph a specific inmate, the reporter must get approval from the correctional lieutenant and the inmate must sign a release.
- Evacuations - The Incident Commander requests evacuations through the responsible agency, and that agency should handle the news media. However, if CAL FIRE receives calls as to the extent and locations of evacuations, information personnel should verify and co-release information regarding evacuations while maintaining contact with the agency to keep abreast of developments.
- Loss of homes - The source of information on loss of homes is the Damage Assessment Team or law enforcement section assigned to the incident. One of the Information unit's biggest problems is attempting to confirm losses both to the news media and to displaced homeowners.

For more information on the legalities of releasing sensitive information, see [Section 0622](#), Statutes and Guidelines.

## SPECIAL PROBLEMS

(September 1991)

0662.3

Occasionally special situations arise that tax the patience, tact, and human relations skills of information personnel. Generally, these situations involve persons affected by the incident financially, emotionally, or politically. Some problems may be handled in a predictable manner, but none should ever be handled routinely. The following sections identify and briefly discuss a few of these information problems.

For further help with providing information to the media, see [Section 0622](#), Statutes and Guidelines, and [Section 0636](#), Interview Tips.

- "Wild" statements and unfounded claims: If an irate citizen makes improper accusations and charges, information personnel should offer to take the citizen on a tour of the incident area and explain the problems. If the person refuses, information personnel should then inform the press that the citizen turned down an opportunity to learn the facts firsthand.
- Local resorts or businesses: An incident may affect the attempts of the local resorts and businesses to attract customers without directly threatening them. So, information personnel should make an extra effort to say in media statements that the incident is not endangering towns or resorts and that local businesses are open as usual.
- Squelching rumors: Rumor control has high priority. All information personnel must deal promptly with misinformation or misrepresentation of facts. Settle rumors at once; any delay may be too late. Send an Assistant Information Officer to the scene to get the facts and report back to the center.

If the media inquire about an unverifiable rumor, information personnel should find out the facts and call back before their deadlines, if possible. Information officers should never release hearsay, unverified information, or any material that might create a panic. Instead, personnel should ask the media to wait for official verification.

Information personnel should not attempt to guess the answers to reporters' questions. Instead, an information officer should say, "I don't know, but I will try to find out," and then obtain the answer as soon as possible and call the reporter back promptly.

Information officers should play fair with all media and never hold back a story for a particular deadline or special friend. Personnel should release the story as it develops.

- Adverse news: Distorted coverage is only one symptom of unfavorable media relations. Restricted coverage, slanted writing style, emphasized bad points, out-of-context quotations, and critical editorials are other frequent indicators. Information personnel should monitor media coverage of the incident to learn how individual outlets are handling the story. By noting the treatment of common facts released by the Incident Information Center, an information officer can spot early hostility and take appropriate action. Information personnel should react carefully and calmly to wrong or misleading information because corrections or retractions generally achieve a negative effect by drawing more attention to the matter, and replying openly or arguing publicly simply escalates the situation. Instead, personnel should try to determine the reasons for the hostility: Is it a symptom of poor relations? Is the department the day's target of controversy? Is the news outlet attempting to stir interest? Are they getting even? Unless a specific problem is found, it is best to try to forget the past, start anew, treat everyone alike and fairly, and try not to make a big thing out of the issue.

As with firefighting, the best action is prevention. Ongoing daily media relations are critical. Information personnel should build a strong contact, particularly with assigned beat reporters, and pointedly try to keep them well informed.

Information officers should not withhold news just because it is bad. Information personnel must be honest, provide both sides of the story, but anticipate problem areas. Sensitive matters require administrative direction because choosing the proper spokesperson is important. Often, a qualified, knowledgeable, local spokesperson best handles sensitive situations.

If other agencies are involved or directly concerned, information personnel must make certain to advise and inform them of the official position or actions taken by CAL FIRE. Ideally, issues affecting other public bodies and CAL FIRE should be handled jointly with a common approach. Although, this is not always possible, each agency should appreciate the other's position and strive not to weaken it.

[\(see next section\)](#)

[\(see HB Table of Contents\)](#)

[\(see Forms or Forms Samples\)](#)